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THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF THE FUTURE LIFE

A CONSTRUCTIVE STUDY

I. THE METHOD OF APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF THE FUTURE LIFE

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In seeking for a constructive statement of the Christian conception of a future life, the matter of rational method is of first importance. The nature and value of our conclusions will be largely relative to the thought-method which controls our formulations. The reality and grip of our doctrine must depend upon the assent given to our controlling principles. This paper aims to attend somewhat explicitly to our method of approach.

All of the great catholic doctrines of religion may be regarded as expressions of the vital beliefs in terms of which the race interprets the world of life and experience, and shapes the course of society. Convictions, beliefs, faiths are our affirmations of the nature of reality, the forces which make for human progress. They are functions of life. The history of belief shows that they arise out of the constitutional needs of personal life, and they are shaped by the changing needs of developing life. The organic unity of life is such that the fundamental needs and the fundamental doctrines interpreting and administering to these needs are easily and truly viewed in their unity. Thus, we believe in God; we are religious. These affirmations express great human facts of belief, in which the race is one. But this conceptual unity breaks up into the greatest variety when we study these primary facts in the concrete. The unity is an ideal unity, expressed in the greatest complexity. For example, the term "religion" covers a great diversity of phenomena ranging from the crudest and most indefinite to those which are developed, profound, and definite. And the belief in God which lies at the heart of all religion proves

on examination to have no simple and constant content. The meanings both of "God" and of "believe" vary in such a range of diversity between the simple and the sublime, the impulsive and the deliberate, the superstitious and the rational and moral, that the homogeneity of religious belief is less apparent than the heterogeneity. And yet there is a profound sense for the understanding in which we must always maintain the unity of the phenomena of worship.

The belief in the future life is one of these persistent racial phenomena. Through shocks, through metamorphosing types of interpretation, trampled by harsh outbreaks of skepticism, the root of the belief in immortality has survived. Forever it rises up within the human consciousness as either a disowned specter from a childish age, a "pleasing hope," or a confident conviction.

The doctrine, wherever found, has this ideal unity, that it links men, in thought, with a world of reality other than the space and time world where our history is being enacted. It looks backward, or upward, or forward; it looks outward or inward, and it awakens a thought of life and a world of reality not limited by our present time and sense experience. It is a larger world than we know. Is this native conception a baseless dream, or an item of certain knowledge? And under what form shall we conceive it? What is its rational justification?

The problem is confused and complicated by the historic forms in which it has found expression. Like other great human beliefs, its unity threatens to disappear in the complexity in which it is involved. There is no clear teaching anywhere, but confusion, contradictions, and endless variety of belief and unbelief. Clear and unequivocal teaching is the one thing that is denied us by the history. In the absence of any clear and final teaching touching the total data, it is evident that the method by which we grasp the problem in its variety and unity will be of prime importance. Our meaning and our confidence will be relative to the confidence which we give to our comprehensive method of dealing constructively with the whole history. Moreover, without such a preliminary grasp of directive principles of interpretation, we shall almost surely land in some form of irrational dogmatism, or equally

irrational skepticism. What is the reasonable attitude for the modern man toward this ancient aspect of belief? Let us first get our bearings in the matter of rational method.

Broadly speaking, there are two current conceptions of method of approach to the doctrine of a future life: the traditional static method, and the modern development method. These correspond, respectively, to two world-views; the one, a conception of the world and truth as ready-made, absolute; the other, a conception of a growing world, a world that is coming to be by evolutionary processes.

The static or dogmatic method of interpretation of spiritual beliefs looks to some external finality or absolute which shall be the measure of truth and the end of all controversy.¹ This takes the form either of some absolute revelation that can be unequivocally trusted without verification; or some independent "proof" of immortality. The test-method in the first case is expressed in the query, "What saith the Scriptures," or in the assertion, "It is written." The "Revelation" is thus, tacitly at least, in the form of some unique finality beyond which we cannot go. The test-method in the second case is in the form of some rationalism that quotes some logical proof or orthodoxy as the deepest evidence for a future life, and thus rests in a logical certainty—often sanctioned by a pseudo-sanctity.

The rational criticism of both these methods of testing spiritual belief is in the fact that they contradict our best epistemological analysis of the actual processes of knowledge, and ignore the moral roots of spiritual knowledge as an achievement of the individual as well as a growth in society. A spiritual belief "unflecked by experience" would not have final and permanent authority for life. Belief in immortality, like belief in God, is shaped and conditioned by the vital demands of developing life. The relativity of these demands must be somehow taken into account. Moreover, both these modes of approach presuppose an absolute world rather than a relative world. Our method must make earnest with the relativity by which we are environed as well as

¹ By "external" here we mean an apprehension of truth external to one's own experience and creative moral insight; an item of truth taken on authority.

with the absolute which we are ever trying to grasp. The absolute "proofs" and the absolute "revelations" in terms of which other ages managed their problems are seen, under criticism, to involve the relativities of human experience. How shall we find our way to rational peace and confidence in the absence of absolute and oracular "proofs" and "revelation"?

In briefest outline we here commend the empirical or historical method of treating the problem, as over against the static effort which defers to some authoritative standard of truth. For as a matter of fact the doctrine of the future life, as a constant dogma to be repeated as an unvarying article of the creed of succeeding generations of believers, has lost its authority for men. If we are to commend it to men, we must find its form and its validity in the life which environs and controls us. Its truth and its reality must be apprehended by the forms of thought that lead thinking men to reality today. Modern thinking has abandoned the older static conception of a ready-made world and an absolute truth, as contrary to the facts of experience. Neither the world nor society nor truth can be dealt with as rigid finalities, without danger of false abstractions. They are in process—coming to be—rather than absolute achievements. They are in process of making, rather than completed products. In this emphasis upon process according to law, in the human realm, we have the distinctive thing in the "scientific method" or the evolutionary conception of the world, as it is variously called. Our interpretation of spiritual truth must inevitably reflect this general metamorphosis of thought-method. For such a conception of development, introduced into the realm of belief, reveals a complexity in the problem which defeats all absolute proofs and revelations. More exactly said, modern thinking requires that its revelations and proofs shall be given in terms of the processes of life itself and in the law of its unfolding. For both process and law are ineradicable convictions of the modern mind.

Human beliefs, however august and authoritative in their best estate, may be viewed as phenomena of human life. As such they have a natural origin and history. The genetic account and the natural history of a belief are likely to shed important

light upon the function and meaning of such developing belief in the history of society.

The empirical origin of belief in a future life is lost in the obscurity that surrounds all study of aboriginal beginnings. The "classic" theory is that the belief had its beginnings in dreams which led the savage dreamer to believe in another world than the waking world of common life. Instinctive fear and awakening affection must have figured in the projecting of another world in which the realities of this had their counterpart. The common characteristics of all these earliest beginnings of the belief is their superstitious, irrational form, reflecting the superstitious childishness and animalism of the races which have produced them. An absolute origin indeed we cannot find of the idea of another existence. But that the origin was humble and crude we cannot doubt.

As peoples developed, the idea of a future life reflected the developed conceptions of life. Primitive conceptions passed over into more rational and developed forms, always reflecting the type of thought of the race that brought them forth. Thus a comparative study of barbaric tribes of Africa with the savage of North America reveals some most interesting contrasts in their conceptions of the future world, reflecting always the contrasts in their folk-life. Among the pagan peoples and in ethnic religions the belief reflects always the current types of thought, expresses the prevailing philosophic interpretations—in short, the general consciousness of the people.

Now it is possible to study the problem thus genetically and arrive at the conclusion that a history of the development is all that can be attained by study.² In the midst of so much relativity we can only rehearse the processes. But this is to confuse process with meaning, form with function. Questions of origin may never be allowed to take the place of questions of meaning and worth. What is the function, the validity, the meaning for life of this

²A thoroughgoing treatment of the Christian doctrine of a future life, would distinguish the following aspects of the total problem: (1) its empirical source; (2) its historic forms; (3) its rational worth; (4) its practical value. These must be largely merged in our brief discussions.

developing belief? A false naturalism or an ultra-pragmatism sometimes denies the right to go beyond the historic account. But the mind is equally insistent to know the meaning of the process—the worth and validity of that meaning for life. And that larger meaning we may get not so much from studying origins as in inspecting the whole history of the growth of the idea. This leads us to study the doctrine in its fruits rather than in its roots; in its best developments and not in its beginnings alone. We must measure life's meanings, not by their beginnings, but by their outcome, and by the progress from animal beginnings to spiritual achievements. Like the belief in God, and like the confession of faith, the substance of the belief grows. The race is unified in the belief in God—but the significance of the common avowal is a quantity that varies with the barrenness or the wealth of the soul-life. So with all "confessions of faith." And so with the article of the Catholic creed in which we avow belief "in the life everlasting."

When we employ the historic method in dealing with the doctrine we are facing at every stage of the inquiry a double analytic problem. We are concerned always with the given form of the doctrine, and likewise with the permanent truth which it struggles to set forth. We must know the history of a given form of faith that we may answer the question, "Why did the doctrine take this form?" or, "What influences shaped the doctrine?" And we must try to interpret sympathetically the life that lies behind all these forms of belief, and try to discover what motive and meaning were striving for expression in the forms. The function of a belief is quite as valid a problem as its form. Especially must we note the lines of development, and the insights afforded by the richest and best developed personalities. For the worth of the shaping conceptions that determine the form of a doctrine will be a true criterion of the validity of the doctrine. Thus the testimony of experience in its best estate, criticized and corrected by the whole background of human history, furnishes the source of authority of the evidence which is offered for acceptance. The Supreme Personality would thus inevitably become the Supreme Revealer of the truth to us. For the Christian this fact is met in Jesus as the supreme revelation of the truth.

As a provisional statement of the inner intention of the doctrine of a future life, as distinguished from its forms, we have pointed out that it always reflects the native or instinctive estimate of the complex fact of life itself. Life itself—our estimate of it—is always back of our affirmations of future life, of eschatological conceptions, of immortalities. This implicit reference to Life is at least vaguely manifest in the analysis of the crudest forms of the belief. It becomes explicit at a later stage in such conceptions as the value and meaning of life; life as the sharing of divine existence; or the reasoned conviction that personal existence is larger than it seems, etc. These and other estimates of life, one or all, enter into the intention or meaning of the doctrine which is shaped by the mental and moral outlook of the times. It is somehow a personal estimate of life itself—a positive affirmation, implicitly or explicitly made, of that estimate.

The relativity of the doctrine thus becomes apparent. The mental and spiritual outlook of a given age or civilization conditions its affirmation of life, and so its doctrine of future life. The philosophic type under which a man conceives his moral and rational world is a factor in the problem. The personal achievements of a man's inner world by which he enters into life and grasps it in terms of character and personal fellowships is a factor which cannot be measured in the achieving of the personal certainty of immortality.

The conception of a future life then is always an aspect of a haunting racial conviction that life is larger than the history which we are making here and now. It is a protest against certain apparent limitations of life—a faith that lays hold of an unseen reality. The problem appears and reappears as races of men arise and interrogate the limitations of life. There are many answers and many forms of belief. But the belief itself in an unseen and unknown world—a larger life—is essentially a catholic belief. It is a far cry from the ghost world of the savage which fills him with haunting fear and "nameless dread" to the calm faith of the Christian saint and philosopher. But "human nature" somehow unifies the savage and the saint in a common constitutional compulsion to affirm that the limitations of life are unknown, its boundaries are not fixed—that the visible has its setting in

an unknown world. This unexplained frontier is the subject-matter of the problem; our conception of it and the strength of our certainty concerning it are always conditioned by the life out of which we speak.

The preceding studies of the future life have been directed to historical aspects of the Christian doctrine, its beginnings in the New Testament, its antecedents in the Old Testament, and its developments in Christian history. We have been given a concise view of the main facts of the developing history covering the Christian era and the life from which it sprang. Such a view of the facts is of inestimable value for any critical study of the problem. On the other hand, the variety and relativity of the data that result from this study of details naturally awaken the question of the relation of all this to our own belief. Among such a multitude of witnessing voices, how shall thought find any authoritative direction? Whom shall we believe? What is the common content or message of the history? Here the method which seeks for directive principles, and which manages the developing process in terms of such principles and elicits its meanings by interpretation, must take precedence of the static conception of a final oracle. Even the Christian's Bible furnishes no such oracle or absolute finality.

The principle of method which we have treated in the large has of course its specific application in biblical interpretation. Modern historical method of Bible-study is shedding light upon the value and truth of our Christian Bible. But it is surely transforming our method of interpreting the truth and of securing its value for life. Traditional method has been controlled by a thought of the Bible as an oracle constituting an absolute revelation, or constituted of a mosaic of such revelations. These revelations of truth were treated as final revelations from God, somehow kept hermetically in a vacuum apart from life. The relative historical factors were largely overlooked. Thus the teaching of the Bible had an immediate and perpetually valid authority for life and conduct, apart from the human processes of literary expression and interpretation. Modern historical method completely eliminates the oracle method of learning the truth of the Bible.

It regards it as a record of life and interprets it in its meanings for life. It studies origins, influences of environment, developments of religious conceptions, etc. The method of interpretation and appropriation which goes with this form of historical approach must inevitably involve some radical readjustments. We no longer have to do with oracular finalities, but only with a relative history where beliefs are fluent and changing. The simplicity of a standard which will emerge from the past gives way to the search for a meaning that will satisfy and promote the present.

The Christian doctrine of a future life is simply one case in point. If we turn to the Old Testament, we find no clear or consistent teaching which we can accept and transfer bodily into our modern life.³ Rather, we find ourselves studying certain conceptions, partly traceable to the influence of other nations, and partly shaped by the exigencies of the times. Even some of the passages which have commonly been supposed to reveal a full-fledged doctrine uttered with full confidence are seen, under the light of criticism, to yield no such meaning. When we turn to the New Testament a candid study again yields no complete or adequate doctrinal statement, valid for all time.⁴ There is the same sense of development, of relativity, a growing note of confidence toward the future, but great ambiguity regarding an explicit form of doctrine. To be sure, certain spiritual ideals and ethical principles are emerging here into clearer light, and their consequences for future forms of belief are epochal. Spiritual "fulfilment" of meanings sheds a steady light in Jesus' teaching. But when we read the history of doctrine in the church in the succeeding centuries⁵ we are still impressed that no final form of faith was made explicit by Jesus or Paul, and the church is characterized by "a faith beyond the forms of faith" rather than by any successful or final form of conception touching the future life. "I believe in the life everlasting" seems an unquenchable part of the Christian outlook upon life. But what does it mean? The great value of all these studies is in noting the shaping factors of

³ See Professor Paton's discussion, *Biblical World*, Vol. XXXV.

⁴ See Professor Scott's discussion, *Biblical World*, Vol. XXXVIII.

⁵ See Professor Cross's discussion, *Biblical World*, Vol. XXXIX.

belief and in gaining therefrom principles valid for the shaping of our own belief.

Now when we thus seek guidance for our own thought from this variegated history, there is no escape *from rethinking the problem* and reinterpreting it for our own times. There is no oracle, but only the spirit of truth. There are no absolute standards, but only relative standards. The study of the history yields certain directive principles for thought; the study of the development reveals the nature of this truth which every age and every people must think in its own way and as conditioned by its own life. There is a certain content of belief which unifies all this changing of forms. Still the content is no rigid essence, but a developing meaning which in turn is shaped by the age or the man who grasps it.

This process of gaining valid and authoritative guidance for thought from a developing history is a crucial experience in the life of the religious student of today. The absolute standards of the older interpretation are but reluctantly abandoned. The relativity of the method just suggested becomes the starting-point of all sorts of skepticisms and agnosticisms. The capital problem for Christian apologetics today is this very problem of gaining confident religious convictions in a world of process. For our best revelations are in the form of fluent principles and not fixed item or oracles. In a relative world, how can I be sure of fundamental things? The method throws a man back upon the veracity of his own best powers and the veracity of the world with which he deals. But this very attitude of fundamental freedom and confidence is a condition of achieving the deepest spiritual truth: just as it seems to us the condition of understanding the problem under discussion. For this fluent history does not express a lawless relativity. Intelligence itself, in its tasks of thought, and the world of history and experience—these are law-expressing facts, and not lawless phenomena. Intelligence itself and its world—these are worthy of our faith, and they are our guide to confidence and truth. To believe in God is to believe in the veracity of his laws and in the truth of our best efforts under the sanction of our best ethical insight. In any case the modern man

has no lawless oracle to steady his faith in truth. God's meanings must be wrested by the faithful forms of our best experiences. The alternative is dogmatism.

Our search then for a valid form of belief in the future life involves some analysis of the factors which have shaped historic forms of the doctrine, as well as an analysis of the factors which must be taken into account in a formulation for the consciousness of today. Certain emphases of the past will disappear; certain new emphases will come into view. The best developments of self-consciousness, spiritual and rational, must be our court of appeal in the matter of the truth and certainty of our doctrine. Life and experience as we know it must be the field where the testing and verification must take place. But here the completest experience and the completest consciousness—the completest Life—must be our highest authority. In the absolute sense we may say that this conducts the Christian interpreter to the consciousness of Jesus. But on examination, this apparently simple test-principle loses its simplicity in view of the relativities of personal life. The “consciousness of Jesus” cannot be regarded as some unrelated absolute or perfection. The consciousness awakened and promoted within us under the stimulus of Jesus’ leadership is the concrete ultimate by which we measure spiritual belief. The Christian doctrine of a future life is that form of belief to which vital discipleship to Jesus conducts us. This is not an abstract religious “consciousness” achieved in some vacuum; but a consciousness articulated into the forms of today’s best life and thinking. Our problem is: What form does this optimistic estimate of life take for one sensitive to the best Christian civilization of the age; and on what grounds would he justify his faith?